

II

PASCAL

“THERE was once a man who, at the age of twelve, had, by means of dashes and circles, created mathematics; who, at sixteen, had composed the most learned treatise on conic sections that had been written since antiquity; who, at nineteen, reduced to machinery a science which exists entirely in the mind; who, at twenty-three, demonstrated the phenomena of the weight of air and rectified one of the great errors of ancient physics; who, at an age when other men are just beginning to live, having completed the circle of human knowledge, perceived its emptiness, and turned his thoughts toward religion; who, from that time until his death, which occurred in his thirty-ninth year, always sickly and ailing, established the language which Bossuet and Racine spoke, and gave the model of the most refined irony and of the most powerful reasoning; who, finally, in the short intervals between his illnesses, solved by sheer abstraction one of the highest problems of geometry, and jotted down thoughts almost divine. This amazing genius was called Blaise Pascal.”

You have recognized in this masterly page the portrait which the author of *La Génie du Christianisme*, Chateaubriand, drew of Pascal.

La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims* seemed to us the book of a bitter and disillusioned philosopher. His philosophy was not out of harmony with the pessimistic conception which is at the bottom of Jansenism, but, after all, La Rochefoucauld

was not a religious moralist; he was a secular moralist. The author of the *Pensées* is, in the full force of the term, a religious moralist.

The book which he left us—or rather the book which has been constructed from the scattered remains of his thought, of a thought which did not have the time to be fully realized—this book is linked with that great religious revival which developed in seventeenth-century France after forty years of civil wars, dissensions, and anarchy. Men felt the need of turning toward God, of seeking in religion a comfort, a solace to their sufferings, a guiding principle to their actions; and Pascal's book is perhaps the most beautiful outgrowth of this Christian revival.

It was published in 1670, five years after the *Maxims*. La Rochefoucauld had not signed his *Maxims*; he did not wish to acknowledge them. Pascal's *Pensées* appeared under his name, but were published only after his death, by his friends of Port-Royal.

At the beginning of this study, we must impress upon our minds the idea that Pascal's *Thoughts* are in immediate and direct contact with his entire existence. As M. Lanson so well expresses it, "There is no writer who has put into his book more of himself even to the last particle of his humanity."

Blaise Pascal was born at Clermont-Ferrand, June 19, 1623. He was of Auvergnian extraction, and possessed those two qualities which distinguish the people of Auvergne—energy and austerity.

His father, Etienne Pascal, presiding judge of the Excise Court of Clermont, was a man of superior intelligence and great scientific culture. He had the misfortune to lose his wife early; he was left a widower with three children—Blaise, his only son, and two daughters: Gilberte, born in 1620, who by her marriage was later to become Madame

Périer; Jacqueline, born in 1625, who was one day to enter religious life at Port-Royal under the name of Sister Euphemia.

Young Blaise was three years old when he lost his mother. His father sold his office and went to establish himself in Paris in 1631 in order to devote himself exclusively to the education of his children. Unlike Montaigne, who had received at the college of Guyenne a more literary than scientific education, young Pascal received an education which was more scientific than literary. His father was in contact with learned men, the great scholars of the time—Roberval, Fermat, and Father Mersenne, the disciple and friend of Descartes. Thus Pascal's scientific bent is largely explained by the environment in which he was born and in which he grew up.

As his health was not good, his father, fearing the strain of premature study, curbed as much as possible his ardor for self-instruction; but the child's intelligence was so vigorous that, all books being forbidden him, he was able to reconstruct geometry by himself as far as the thirty-second proposition of Euclid.

At the age of sixteen, as Chateaubriand said above, he composed a treatise on conic sections which, presented to Descartes, filled the philosopher with astonishment.

In 1640 his father, having been appointed comptroller of subsidies in Normandy, went to reside in Rouen; and it was then that, in order to simplify his father's task, young Blaise invented his calculating machine, an arithmetical machine, the original model of which is to be found in the Clermont-Ferrand library. He worked frantically, and already his health was causing some uneasiness. In 1646, an event occurred which was to have most enduring consequences for Pascal.

It was then that what is called his first conversion took place. I beg of you, do not misunderstand this term, which did not have in the language of the seventeenth century the meaning which we give it today. What we call conversion today is passing from the state of unbelief to that of belief. But, for a man of the seventeenth century who had never broken with religion, conversion was passing from a tepid belief to a more fervent piety.

Under what circumstances did this first conversion occur? In January, 1646, Pascal's father fell on the ice and dislocated his thigh. He was forced to remain stretched out in bed for several months. It was then that two Norman gentlemen came to see him, to chat with and amuse him, and brought him some books with which the Pascal family had not been acquainted until then. They were Jansenist books. Pascal was then twenty-three. He opened these books with curiosity. Scarcely had he started reading when he buried himself in them without being any longer able to break away. He was conquered at once by the logical severity and moral austerity of the new doctrine. With the passion of his fiery nature he threw himself into Jansenism. Madame Périer, who wrote a biography of her brother which is extremely valuable to those who wish to know him, tells us in this connection:

"God so enlightened him by this reading that he understood perfectly that the Christian religion compels us to live only for God, and to have no other aim but Him."

Pascal's Jansenist ardor manifested itself at that period by an act for which he has sometimes been reproached. There was in Rouen a friar known as Frère Saint-Anze, who, among other suspected tenets, upheld the idea that a vigorous mind can, without faith, by reason alone, succeed in knowing all the mysteries of religion. Pascal denounced

this doctrine to the archbishop of Rouen, and had no respite until the friar had rectified his error (1647).

He converted everybody around him including his father and sisters. It is from this time that the religious inclination of his young sister Jacqueline dates. Moreover his illness, which was growing worse, bound him more and more closely to Jansenism, which brought precious solace to his suffering. It was at this period that he wrote the *Prayer to Ask God the Use of Illnesses*.

However, his conversion did not interrupt his scientific work. From 1646 to 1648, in Rouen, Paris, and Clermont, he performed himself or had performed by friends, his brother-in-law in particular, some still famous experiments which demonstrated the weight of air.

Late in 1647, he wrote the preface to a *Treatise on the Vacuum*, which has also remained famous because it is there that Pascal, at variance with his century, declared that the classics are not our masters, at least in matters of science; that it is the moderns who are the true classics, because they profit by all the accumulated experience of preceding centuries. For the first time the scientific theory of progress was formulated.

Beginning in 1649, there occurred in Pascal a return toward the worldly. It was the beginning of a period which, unfortunately, is still not very well known today—the worldly period. He lived first in Clermont, then, after the death of his father (1651) in Paris. In order to forget, he mixed with the world. It seemed that he was being drawn away from Jansenism. The relationships of social life brought him diversion. Perhaps he had at that time some secret passion, as that *Discourse on the Passions of Love* (of which the authorship is contested, with decisive proof) would have us believe. In any case, let us not misunder-

stand the nature of this "dissipation" of Pascal's. There was nothing dissolute about it. It was simply the freer life of a man who was no longer solely possessed by his religious obsession, and who entered willingly into the century. It was then that he had occasion to make the acquaintance of certain minds, such as Miton and Méré, who were connected with the world of free-thinkers; and it was then too that, for the first time, he discovered Montaigne, this Montaigne with whom he was to acquaint himself thoroughly, so as to be able to refute him more completely.

At that time he seemed to be becoming more and more detached from the Jansenism to which he had at first rallied with so ardent a conviction.

But on the night of November 23, 1654, he had his revelation—one might say his ecstatic trance. What happened that night? We do not know exactly, but after his death, there was found, sewed in the clothing that he was wearing, a little paper on which, in hasty writing, he had noted the emotions of that revealing night. It is what is called Pascal's *Memorial*. He did not want to forget the sudden visitation that had lighted up his soul. It was then that he decided to enter Port-Royal.

Port-Royal was a house where life was ordered by the austere rule of Jansenism. There, nuns who had received the purest Jansenist doctrine from Saint-Cyran passed their days in penance and prayer, while in the valley of Chevreuse, far from Paris, a certain number of hermits sought, in the peaceful seclusion of the country, so propitious to religious effusion, forgetfulness of the world and consolation for the sorrows of existence.

It was there, among these hermits, that Pascal went to shut himself up and live the last years of his life. I shall not tell you how at this period, from January 23, 1656, to

March 24, 1657, he had occasion to write, against the Jesuits, that vigorous pamphlet entitled *Provincial Letters*. In it he defended the cause of Jansenism by attacking the moral laxity of the Jesuits. But, setting aside these letters—which are, however, so valuable to French literature, since they were, in 1656 (that is to say three years before *Les Precieuses Ridicules*), the first model of refined irony—we come to his book of *Thoughts*, the origin of which we must attempt to trace, in order to see how it becomes on the whole, the highest, the most beautiful, and the most complete manifestation of a firm religious conviction.

We know from Pascal's sister, Madame Périer, how her brother conceived the idea of this book. His niece, whose godfather he was, had been miraculously cured on the twenty-fourth of March, 1656, of a lachrymal fistula, by contact with a relic brought to Port-Royal; and Pascal was so struck with this benefit granted by God to her whom he considered his daughter in the faith, that, from that time on, he wished to consecrate the last years of his life to the composition of an apology for the Christian religion against all those who attacked it.

From 1656 to August 19, 1662, the day when he died at the age of thirty-nine, Pascal, when not employing his time in the practice of asceticism or charity, busied himself feverishly in assembling the materials of the book which he proposed to write.

This book, then, had its inception in Pascal's Jansenist fervor. He never had time to finish it, and what is today called Pascal's *Thoughts* is all the materials which remain to us of the projected apology—materials which are perhaps more beautiful in their incomplete state than the finished work would have been. Only a few passages are sufficiently

developed to appear final; the rest is a collection of outlines, fragments, and notes.

Pascal worked according to his inspiration. He jotted down on odds and ends of paper the thoughts that passed through his mind, the result of his musings or his reading. Sometimes these were only an almost formless series of words. These notes, these documents as we would say, he put away in his chest of drawers; after his death, his friends at Port-Royal discovered all these scraps of paper, gathered them up carefully, and pasted them in a large ledger, which constitutes the autographic manuscript of the *Pensées*.

The majority of these thoughts are in Pascal's own hand, and in a handwriting terribly difficult to read. Others were dictated by Pascal, when he was ill, to a secretary who transmitted them to us in a more finished hand. To assist us in reading these thoughts, which are occasionally undecipherable, we have two copies made at Port-Royal, which, like the manuscript, are preserved in the National Library in Paris.

The fragments of the apology were published in Paris in 1670, eight years after the death of the author, under this title: *Thoughts of Monsieur Pascal on Religion and Divers Other Subjects, Which Were Found among His Papers after His Death*. The success of the work was great, so great that in the same year four editions of it were issued. Later a number of reprints have appeared, with a certain number of previously unpublished fragments.

Although Pascal's friends at Port-Royal religiously brought out what remained of his work, they did not consider it their duty to publish these fragments in accordance with the strict laws which govern us today in establishing texts. For various reasons, some of a religious nature, others literary, they believed that they ought to dress up

these fragments a little, that they could not present them in the state in which Pascal had left them. They suppressed many of the thoughts and rearranged certain others. In short, they gave the best text that could then be given, considering the habits of the time.

But a day came when, by a comparison of this edition with the autographic fragments, certain discrepancies were revealed.

In a sensational report which raised much clamor at that time (1842), the philosopher Victor Cousin loudly proclaimed that the genuine text of Pascal was not to be had and that it was extremely urgent that some one should undertake a more exact edition of the *Thoughts*, than the preceding ones. The first to respond to Cousin's appeal was Prosper-Faugère, who, in 1844, published an edition in accordance with the manuscript; this edition is undoubtedly not perfect, but it was the first attempt to reproduce the genuine work.

Since then, numerous editions have followed one another, among which must be mentioned those of Ernest Havet, Auguste Molinier, Gustave Michaut, and Léon Brunschwig. This last has become the classic edition of the *Pensées*.

In regard to the *Pensées*, several questions present themselves, of which I should like to give you at least a rapid sketch.

First, what goal did Pascal set up for himself? We know from his sister that Pascal, in his religious fervor, had undertaken an *Apology for the Christian Religion*. But a justification is always directed against somebody. When one takes up the defense of an idea, it is because that idea is contested and its truth must be established. There were, then, in the seventeenth century, men who disputed the truth of the Christian religion? Yes, undoubtedly, and these men

were numerous. On this point we have very precise testimony. Father Mersenne, the friend of Descartes, tells us that in 1623 there were counted in Paris not less than fifty thousand sceptics. The figure seems fantastic to us, and we might be tempted to believe that Mersenne exaggerated. However, a work published in the same year by a Jesuit—Father Garasse, to whom we owe the *Curious Doctrine of the Wits or Would-Be Wits of the Day*—gives us an intimate view of some of these wits, who were absolute unbelievers.

And if we did not have these two witnesses, one fact alone would speak for itself. Why then did all the apologists and preachers of the period, notably Bossuet, combat these doctrines with such passionate zeal, if not because they were held to be formidable to religion? All these sceptics proved a very important group who claimed spiritual descent from Montaigne. They were called libertines. But here again the word had not, in the language of the seventeenth century, the same meaning as today. Nowadays we understand by "libertines" those who wish to live their life freely, without submitting to any moral restraint. In the seventeenth century, the libertine was often very conservative in his conduct, and nothing in his actions distinguished him from the Christian; but in his spiritual jurisdiction he reserved his freedom of judgment; he insisted on following the guidance of reason alone, not of some dogma received from such and such a church. His motto was: "*Foris ut mos est, intus est libet.*"

It was during his worldly period that Pascal had learned to know these free-thinkers. It was then that he was able, in his intercourse with Miton and Méré, to see how much they owed to Montaigne, their choir director; and it was against them, heirs of Montaigne's scepticism, that Pascal planned to write a vindication of the Christian religion. "Let

them at least learn what this Christian religion is that they combat, before they contend against it."

Here we have, then, the primary idea of Pascal, his basic design. Now then, from what documents did he derive material for his work? What are the sources of his thought?

They are multiple, complex, and difficult to determine. Foremost—that goes without saying—must be placed the theological sources.

Like Bossuet, Pascal read the Bible a great deal; it is even said that he almost knew it by heart. He had read St. Paul and St. Augustine. He was familiar with the works of Jansénius and St. Cyran. He seems to have read very closely certain works of François de Sales, above all his *Treatise on the Love of God*. Finally, let us not forget that in 1629, under the pen of Hugo Grotius, had been published a great treatise of the truth of the Christian religion, *De Veritate Religionis Christianae*, which was translated into French not less than six times between 1636 and 1659.

Such were the religious sources. A place must also be given to the secular sources, and, above all, to Montaigne, whom Pascal studied much in order to refute him authoritatively. He profited greatly by his psychological discoveries.

However, as he is, without aspiring to be, a greater artist than Montaigne, it often happens that in taking his inspiration from Montaigne, he surpasses him. Everyone knows the famous passage in which Montaigne speaks of the fears we have, in spite of all reason, when the imagination prevails. "Let a philosopher be placed in a cage of fine wires, widely spaced, hung at the top of the towers of Notre Dame de Paris; he will see how utterly impossible it is for him to fall, and yet—" Pascal has reduced this passage of fifteen lines to five, with a rare vigor of condensation: "The greatest philosopher in the world, on a plank wider than necessary,

if there is an abyss below, although his reason convinces him of his safety, will be prevailed upon by his imagination. Many would grow pale and wince at the thought."

Pascal also read Charron, the disciple of Montaigne. And Guillaume de Vaix, translator and commentator of Epictetus, the Stoic philosopher, revealed to him the worth of moral effort and the dignity of human thought.

Finally, let us not overlook the personal sources, always difficult to determine. Pascal put into his work a great part of himself; he put into it all his soul, his intelligence, his imagination, his heart; he put into it all his life—his life as a scholar, as a man of the world, as a Christian; he put into it the profound and dolorous emotions of a nature that labored while being consumed by illness.

Another question which it is impossible to answer is that of the plan Pascal would have followed if he had completed his work.

We know that in 1657 or 1658, at Port-Royal, before the hermits, in a lecture which lasted more than two hours, Pascal set forth the plan of the apology which he proposed to write. It is truly a pity that no one happened to be there to take notes and give us a résumé of that lecture. The information that has been supplied us by Pascal's brother-in-law, Étienne Périer, by his sister, Gilberte, and by Filleau de la Chaise, does not agree within itself, and is more than once contradicted by the often mysterious notes that Pascal put on his scraps of paper.

From this it is easily understood why we have so many editions of the *Pensées* and why they never resemble one another. It is because, according to the circumstances, the editors—Catholic, Protestant, and sceptic—have tried to restore Pascal's plan, taking their inspiration from their own ideas. Their various interpretations show how vain

their attempts have been. Two solutions only are possible: either to reproduce the manuscript, purely and simply, which is what Gustave Michaut has done; or to group the thoughts according to their analogy, which is what Ernest Havet and Leon Brunschwig, following the Port-Royalists, have done.

But if it is impossible to reconstruct the plan Pascal would have followed, we can at least, lacking this plan, sketch out the general design of his work, for he gave it to us in the conversation on Epictetus and Montaigne which he had in 1655 with Monsieur de Sacy—a conversation which has been carefully preserved and which largely illuminates for us Pascal's thought.

Let us try, then, in the light of this document, to see what he planned to do.

Man presents himself to us as a mass of contradictions. He is a strange compound of greatness and wretchedness. Who will tell us the answer to this riddle? The only doctrine that can be true is the one which takes into account both this greatness and this wretchedness. Can that be philosophy? All philosophers have endeavored to explain human nature to us; but their systems can be resolved into two. Some, like Epictetus, see in man only his greatness; the others, like Montaigne, see only his baseness. It is impossible moreover to reconcile them, for each excludes the other.

Then we must resort to some other explanation. The only one which would hold, for Pascal, was Christianity. Christianity alone accounts for the strange compound which is man, because it teaches us that man, the creature of God, is great by his origin, but, having fallen by original sin, he is forever wretched if he is not regenerated by grace. Pascal's originality is in his having founded his justification on the psychology of human nature. This psychological aspect would undoubtedly have been very highly developed

in the final work, judging from the large number of fragments which remain to us on the greatness and the wretchedness of man. For these fragments one may consult in particular the Brunschwig edition, section II, VI, VII.

Pascal was a psychologist, but he was also a scholar. The geometrician that he had been all his life would have appeared in the *Apology*. He appears in certain fragments of the *Thoughts*. It is he who debates against the adversary with impassioned logic, of which the most noteworthy example is the *argument of the wager*. Pascal developed the idea that, the wager being obligatory, it is all to our advantage to wager that a future life does exist, and to organize our present life with a view to this future state.

"Let us examine this point, and let us say: 'God is, or he is not.' But, to which side shall we be inclined? Reason is of no avail: there is an infinite chaos which separates us from him. A game is played at the extremity of this infinite space, in which heads or tails will come up. What will you stake? By reason, you cannot make either the one or the other fall up; by reason, you cannot defend either one of the two.

"And the adversary will answer: 'The proper thing to do is not to wager at all.'

"Yes, but the wager must be made; that is not voluntary. You have embarked. Which will you take then? Let us see. Since you must choose, let us see what affects you least. You have two things to lose, the true and the good, and two things to stake, your reason and your will, your understanding and your happiness. And your nature has two things to flee, error and wretchedness. Your reason is not more offended in choosing one than the other, since you must necessarily choose. That is an empty argument! But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in making the choice that God exists. Let us consider these two cases. If you win,

you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing. Then wager unhesitatingly that He exists. I tell you that you will thereby gain in this life, and that at each step you take in this path, you will see so much certainty of winning, and so much emptiness in what you risk that you will finally recognize that you have wagered on something certain and infinite for which you have given nothing." When some one defined Pascal as an "impassioned geometer," it was undoubtedly of fragments such as this one that he was thinking

And here we touch another point. Pascal was a psychologist and a geometrician, but he was also deeply emotional. If he would have given a large place in his *Apology* to proof, he would have given a still larger one to what he called the heart. "The heart has its reasons which reason does not know." For Pascal, religion is a matter of sentiment and will more than of intelligence—hence his scorn of physical and metaphysical proofs of the existence of God. We believe we understand these proofs, but no sooner have we grasped them than we think we have made a mistake. Moral proofs are more certain: "It is the heart that feels God, and not the mind. That is what faith is—God felt by the heart, not by the reason."

And Pascal, even more anxious to persuade than to convince, would have conceived the *Apology* less as a rational demonstration of the truth of Christianity than as an attempt at the conversion of hearts and wills.

One question remains to be examined. I shall say only a few words about it.

Up to this point, it is the very foundation of Pascal's thought that we have tried to reach. Yet you have seen how thrilling is its expression, very different from the compact and dense, but also hard and cold form which characterizes La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims*. That is why Pascal

will always be read more than La Rochefoucauld. Even if we do not accept his religious ideas, he appears to us as one of the greatest artists in the literature of the seventeenth century, because of the constant variety in the expression of his ideas.

He was not indifferent to form, and it is said that he revised one of his *Provinciales* as many as thirteen times.

First of all, we find maxims in his writings, as in La Rochefoucauld's:

"The heart has its reasons, which the mind will never know."

"Maker of witticisms, poor character."

"Do you want some one to think well of you? Do not speak well of yourself."

We also find an ironic pleasantry of an entirely modern accent; for example, this thought about war:

"Why do you kill me?"

"Why not! Don't you live on the other side of the water? My friend, if you lived on this side, I would be an assassin, and it would be unjust to kill you like this; but since you live on the other side, I am a brave man, and this is right."

We find thoughts of a familiar realism, fairly rare in the seventeenth century:

"Had Cleopatra's nose been a little shorter, the fate of the world might have been different."

And this one, of a tragic beauty, in regard to life:

"The last act is bloody, however beautiful may be the comedy in all the rest; at the last, earth is thrown over the head, and there is an end of it forever."

Other thoughts, full of eloquence:

"The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me."

And above all, the passage about the "thinking reed"—
"Man is but a reed, but a thinking reed."

Finally—and it is on this note that I shall close—the ardent soul that was Pascal, this soul which had had its night of exaltation on the twenty-third of November, 1654—was to pour itself out quite naturally in religious effusions. Re-read the *Mystère de Jésus*, of such gripping stress:

"Console thyself; thou wouldst not seek Me if thou
hadst not found Me. Doctors will not cure thee, for
thou shalt die at last. But it is I who heal the body
and render it immortal."

I believe that no one has ever gone higher in the expression of the mystic sentiment. Here Pascal reveals himself a great poet: without effort he attains the pinnacle of poetic exaltation.